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ABSTRACT

This study examined the collaborative planning and decision making of a grade level team of elementary teachers. The purpose of the case study was to determine the level and nature of interaction among teachers who participated in grade level team planning meetings during the school year. Eight fifth grade teachers in a mid-South suburban school district participated in the initial phase of the study in the spring of the school year. Two teachers on the team were first-year teachers. The others ranged in experience from 2-13 years. One teacher was African American, and the rest were Caucasian. All were female. The researcher observed the teachers during their regular team planning meetings, which were 90 minutes Monday afternoons after school and 45 minutes Wednesday mornings during their students' physical education period. The Monday afternoon meetings were devoted primarily to curriculum planning. The Wednesday morning meetings were devoted to team business. The team captain conducted both meetings. The researcher compiled field notes on individual levels of participation and categorized the types of teacher interaction. The analyses of these data provide insight into team planning and decision making as practiced in this situation, as well as the relative roles of veteran and novice teachers. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/SM)

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Collaborative Planning and Decision Making: Preliminary Conclusions from an Ongoing Case Study of Elementary School Team Teaching

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Abstract

This study examined the collaborative planning and decision making of a grade level team of elementary teachers. The purpose of the case study was to determine the level and nature of interaction among teachers who participated in grade level team planning meetings during the school year. Eight fifth-grade teachers in a suburban school district in the mid-South participated in the initial phase of the study in the spring of the school year. Two teachers on this team first-year teachers. The others ranged in experience from two to thirteen years. One teacher was African-American, the others were Caucasian. All were female.

The researcher observed the teachers during their regular team planning meetings -- 90 minutes Monday afternoons after school, 45 minutes Wednesday mornings during their students' physical education period. The Monday afternoon meetings were primarily devoted to curriculum planning. The Wednesday morning meetings were devoted to team business. The team captain conducted both of these meetings.

The researcher compiled field notes on individual levels of participation, and categorized the types of interactions by the teachers. The analysis of these data provides insight into team planning and decision-making as practiced in this situation, as well as the relative roles of veteran and novice teachers.

Collaborative Planning and Decision Making: Preliminary Conclusions from an Ongoing Case Study of Elementary School Team Teaching

Since the school reform era began with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, much attention has been focused on improving the quality of teaching. Included in this focus has been the quality of teachers entering the profession, the quality professional development opportunities for teachers, and the quality of the environment in which teachers work. One aspect of this discussion has centered on the need for collaboration between teachers as a means of improving the professional life of the teacher, described as isolated and lacking in professional interaction (Goodlad, 1984; Holmes Group, 1986).

In the 1970's collaboration at the elementary level took the form of team teaching. In these settings, two to five teachers were assigned to teach all subjects to 50 to 150 students, frequently in open space classrooms (Goddu, 1975; Sterns, 1977). Many of these attempts were abandoned because their adoption was a top-down decision not supported with adequate preparation (Goodlad, 1984). Collaboration in the elementary school has taken a different form in recent years. Instructional teams at the elementary school level may now consist of all the teachers at a given grade level, each responsible for a separate classroom of students, but meeting together to plan instruction and carry out grade level administrative tasks (Lambert, 1995; Shields, 1997). This type of collaboration is the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The present study examined the collaborative planning and decision making of a grade level team of elementary school teachers over a three-month period. The purpose of the study was to determine the level and nature of interaction among teachers who participated in grade

level team planning meetings throughout the school year. The analysis of these data was intended to provide insight into team decision-making as practiced in this situation, as well as the relative roles of veteran and novice teachers. Knowledge gained from this study is intended to guide future study into the perceptions held by team members about their team, their roles on the team, and the effects that this type of collaboration has on their teaching. Eventually insights into this new form of team teaching can be integrated into teacher preparation programs.

Research Questions

Questions that this study is intended to answer include:

1. What is the level of participation during team meeting by in an elementary school grade level team?
2. What types of interactions take place between teachers during such grade level team planning meetings?
3. How do experienced and novice teachers differ in their levels and types of interaction during team planning meetings?

As a case study, this investigation does not purport to generalize to other situations. Instead, it is an attempt to provide a rich source of data about how elementary school teachers work together to make decisions and plan curriculum for their students.

Related Research

Teacher collaboration has taken different forms at different levels of schooling. Institutional structures at the middle and high school level have provided the impetus for collaboration in those settings, while elementary schools have used a variety of plans for teacher collaboration.

Collaboration in middle schools has taken the form of interdisciplinary teams, a group of

teachers teaching their subject matter specialities to a common core of students, using a common planning time to coordinate activities, deal with problem students, and integrate curriculum (Erb & Doda, 1989; McQuaide, 1992; Schumacher, 1995; Martin, 1995). In high schools, departments made up of subject matter specialists have developed and implemented curriculum within their disciplines (Siskin, 1990; Siskin, 1994; Siskin & Warren, 1995), and attempts at curriculum integration have also been made (Pettus, 1994). At both the middle and high school levels, subject matter specialization is a critical variable in collaboration. The middle school model attempts to eliminate barriers between subject areas through the interdisciplinary team, while the high school focuses on the content expertise of teachers through the departmental organization.

At the elementary school level, collaboration had been attempted prior to the current school reform era (Sowers, 1968; Goddu, 1975; Moody & Amos, 1975; Sterns, 1977). Many elementary schools experimented with team teaching – placing several teachers in simultaneous contact with a group of students, frequently through creating open space classrooms – in the 1960's and 1970's. In these settings, two to five teachers were assigned to teach all subjects to 50 to 150 students. In the best of these settings, teachers took on differentiated instructional roles, some with small groups, some with large groups, some working one-on-one. In other settings, teachers taught as they always had, without the benefit of walls between classrooms. These approaches were in large part abandoned by the end of the 1970's in response to the "back-to-basics" movement and the realization on the part of many educators that many children needed the stability of an individual teacher for most of their instruction.

A more contemporary approach to team teaching in the elementary school acknowledges the shortcomings of the open space teaming model and leaves students in self-contained

classrooms. Teaming takes place through the use of a common planning time (a device borrowed from the middle school model) during which time teachers collaborate on administrative issues and curriculum (Lambert, 1995). Little research on this form of team teaching has been published, but its potential has not gone unnoticed.

The value of collaboration as a means of enhancing teachers' continuing professional development is one focus of a major report of the U.S. Department of Education (1999). The report, which includes data from a nation-wide survey of teachers, criticizes traditional professional development opportunities for teachers, such as workshops and conferences, because they lack connection to the classroom. In addition to mentoring and induction programs for new teachers, peer collaboration "has been heralded by teachers, researchers and policy makers as essential to teachers' continuous learning." (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 28).

Teachers surveyed for the USDOE study reported a high incidence of regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers, including "a common planning period for *team* teachers [emphasis added] (USDOE, 1999, p. 30). The nature of team teaching assumed in this report is not stated, so it is unclear if teachers who share only a common planning time are considered team teachers. Thus the prevalence of a common planning period during which elementary teachers collaborate on curriculum planning is not established. Regardless, 40% of teachers who did participate in team planning during a common planning time believed that this collaboration helped their teaching a lot.

The day-to-day work of contemporary team teaching approaches in the elementary school has been the subject of few studies. Shields (1997) reports that successful team collaboration not only requires administrative support, but also hinges on personality traits and positive interaction

between team members. Honesty, flexibility, the ability to communicate, and confidence were contributors to team success. Egotism, cynicism, and non-cooperation were personality traits associated with unsuccessful teams.

Team Teaching, a project of the Northern Nevada Writing Project Teacher-Researcher Group (1996) provides rich anecdotal data. A Nevada law mandating a 16-1 pupil-teacher ratio in grades 1-3 resulted in many teachers undertaking team teaching arrangements. Most elementary teachers in this study were paired with another teacher in the same room, so the collaboration was closer and more intense than simply sharing a common planning time.

Collaboration among teachers in elementary schools is advocated by many, but has been studied by few. No study of collaborative planning by teachers who maintain their own self-contained classroom has been found. Such a study might help to provide insight into the benefits and pitfall of such an arrangement. One fertile area of interest would be the roles played by veteran and novice teachers in team planning, and the effects such arrangement have on the professional development of all teachers on the team.

Methodology

Subjects

Eight elementary teachers teaching at Fountain Valley School, a large elementary (K-5) school in a suburban school district in the mid-South, participated in this study. Two teachers on this team were first-year teachers, and the others ranged in experience from two to eleven years. One of the first-year teachers was African-American, all other teachers on the team were Caucasian. A team captain selected by team members conducted all meetings.

Data Collection

This phase of data collection took place in March, April, and May of the school year. The

team is a looping team; i.e., it follows a group of students for more than one year. At this point in data collection, the students on the team were fifth-graders who were about to graduate from Fountain Valley. In the fall, the team would receive a new set of fourth-grade students who would be with the team for the next two years.

The team was selected for study after consultation with area principals. It presented a wide disparity of teaching experience levels, a sufficient mix of veteran and novice teachers to examine the contributions of each, significant experience with this form of team teaching, and the potential of examining the evolution of team functioning over a period of time, due to anticipated personnel changes for the upcoming school year. Two teachers were applying for transfers to a new middle school in the district, and enrollment trends indicated the addition of one new team member because of a larger rising fourth-grade population. Thus there was the possibility of three new team members in the fall.

Data were collected by using case study methods outline by Stake (1995). The researcher collected data through observation of team meetings. The team met twice a week for team planning -- 90 minutes Monday afternoons after school, 45 minutes Wednesday mornings during the students' physical education period. The team captain conducted both of these meetings. Wednesday morning meetings were devoted to team business, and were organized around an agenda developed and distributed by the team captain. Monday afternoon meetings were primarily devoted to curriculum planning. At the Monday meeting the team worked through the entire curriculum – reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies -- each week.

At the beginning of the study, the researcher collected descriptive quantitative data indicating levels of participation by individual members of the team. During three team meetings lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, he tallied each team member's statements,

questions, affirmations, and comments that were longer than three words. This preliminary data was collected to establish baseline participation levels from which to conduct more detailed analysis.

After establishing consistent levels of participation by team members, the researcher collected a second set of quantitative descriptive data, again through observations of team meetings. During four 60 to 90 minute meetings, the researcher categorized the types of interactions by teachers, using a system he developed based on previous observations. Seven types of interactions were coded:

AI: Agenda Item Initiation – a teacher initiated discussion of an item on the agenda (written or unwritten)

AC: Agenda Item Continuation – a teacher made a comment or asked a question related to the agenda item currently being discussed

RD: Redirect – a teacher redirected the discussion back to a previous item from the agenda

ST: Sidetrack – a teacher made a comment that did not relate to the substance of the agenda item under discussion. Anecdotes and amusing comments about students and other teachers or building personnel were coded in this category, including those that were unrelated to the agenda item as well as that were related to the agenda item but were not oriented to the task at hand.

MS: More Sidetrack – a teacher added a comment or told an anecdote that continued the sidetrack discussion

BA: Back to Agenda – a teacher made a comment or asked a question that led the discussion back to the original agenda item. This item was coded for both sidetrack discussions

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and redirect (related to previous agenda item) discussions

PR: Private – a teacher entered into or continued a private discussion with another teacher while the rest of the team continued on the agenda item. From these data, the types of interactions by each teacher were recorded, and compared with those of other teachers on the team.

Toward the end of the school year, two teachers mentioned previously received transfers to a new middle school in the district. Enrollment trends confirmed that there would also be one additional teacher unit added to the team the following year. Thus there were three positions to be filled on the team.

At Fountain Valley, teacher teams participate in the interviewing of candidates who have been screened by the building principal. Toward the end of the school year, team members participated in several interviews of prospective new teachers. The researcher observed two meetings at which the teachers discussed the interviews they had held with prospective teachers. They discussed these interviews during their meetings, and these discussions provided insight into the team's view of essential qualities for beginning teachers. In addition, these discussions generated comments regarding the perception of the team held by team members and others at Fountain Valley. The researcher recorded these data in anecdotal form.

Data Analysis

Levels of Participation

Data for levels of participation are presented in Table 1. Analysis of participation data from the first three meeting observations revealed that three experienced teachers had consistently higher levels of participation than the other five. Kathy Henry, the team captain with nine years of experience, had an average participation level of 27.8%; that is, she made an

average of 27.8% of the total number of comments, questions and affirmations longer than three words in the three meetings. Carol Allen, a teacher with seven years of experience, had an average participation level of 23.2%, and Susan Collins, the most experienced of all the teachers on the team at eleven years, had an average participation level of 12.6%. This last figure is inflated by the fact that at one meeting, she led a discussion of research paper topics and logistics at the request of the team captain. As a result, at that meeting her participation level was 24.2%. At the other two meetings in this data set, her participation levels averaged 10%. Three of the least experienced teachers on the team – Lynn Taylor (4.4%), Julie Smith (6.3%), Anne Melton (7.1%), – recorded the lowest levels of participation during these meetings.

Types of Participation

Data for types of participation were collected using the categories developed by the researcher after observing the first three meetings. Table 2 presents aggregated data for the four team meetings coded in this way, indicating that 74.9% of all interactions were coded AC – continuations of the current agenda topic. When combined with AI (agenda item initiation), RD (redirecting to a previous agenda item), and BA (back to the current agenda item after a sidetrack), 83.5% of interactions were related to an agenda item. By contrast, 5.6% of interactions were coded ST (a sidetrack comment), and 4.3% MS (more sidetracking) – a total of 9.9% of interactions were unrelated to agenda items. Finally, 6.7% of interactions were private interactions between two team members.

By analyzing the types of participation for each team member, a different picture of team interaction emerges. These data are presented in Table 3. They indicate that team members varied in the types of interactions they used more and less frequently.

For example, percentages of team members' participation coded as AC – agenda

continuation – ranged from 86.1% for Susan Collins and 83.5% for Lynn Taylor, to 67.0% for Marsha Curry, 65.9% for Linda Miller, and 47.4% for Julie Smith. On the other hand, Linda Miller (11.4%) and Kathy Henry (8.6%) had the highest percentage of their interactions coded ST – a sidetrack comment, while Julie Smith (0%) and Susan Collins (0.9%) had the lowest percentage of comments in this category.

If the ST and MS categories – the two categories involving sidetrack interactions – are combined, they include 22.8% of Linda Miller's interactions and 12.9% of Kathy Henry's. At the other end of this scale only 0.9% of Susan Collins' interactions, 5.2% of those of Anne Melton, and 7.5% of those of Lynn Taylor would fall into the combined sidetrack category.

Finally, the PR (Private Conversation) category is of interest. Over 42% of Julie Smith's interactions fell into this category, along with 16.9% for Anne Melton and 13.2% for Marsha Curry. At the other extreme, only 1.5% of Lynn Taylor's interactions, 2.3% of Linda Miller's, and 2.6% of Kathy Henry's were private.

The researcher observed two team meetings at which interviews with prospective teachers were discussed. Two candidates, Brenda May and Pam Russell, were discussed. Brenda May had completed her student teaching experience under the supervision of Susan Collins, a team member, and worked for a year as an instructional aide at Fountain Valley. Pam Russell had completed her internship at another school in another locale, but was also employed as an instructional aide at Fountain Valley.

Discussion of Brenda May did not focus on the interview as much as on the teachers' experiences with her at school. Teachers commented on her rapport with special needs children, her initiative in dealing with problems, and her ability to get things done. Susan Collins commented, "She doesn't let details hang." Kathy Henry, the team captain, asked and received

from the team a recommendation to hire her, which she would present to the principal.

The teachers' interview with Pam Russell was much more central to their discussion. Teachers had posed hypothetical teaching situation questions to her. Her response to a question about teaching mathematics was focused on isolated skill development rather than placing the topic in a meaningful, problem-solving context. This was a concern to teachers, but after expressing this concern they turned to a discussion of their observations of her interactions with children in her role as an instructional aide. They commented on her nervousness at the interview. They agreed to interview her again, with teachers who could not attend the previous interview taking the lead. Marsha Curry made the point that "it's okay if someone has a different philosophy; we're so strong that we can bring people along."

At a different meeting, the team again discussed Pam Russell (following her second team interview), and another candidate screened by the principal, Judy Moore. Linda Miller was satisfied with Pam Russell's answers to the hypothetical questions. Carol Allen pointed out that she "knew every accommodation" necessary for children with special needs, was willing to try new approaches, and that she was also very familiar with this year's third grade class, which will be this team's group for the next two years in the looping cycle. Pam Russell remained a viable candidate after this discussion.

Judy Moore, a teacher from another district with several years of experience, was also discussed. Carol Allen was "very impressed" although "she's very different from me." Susan Collins commented that Judy Moore "rode the fence" on several questions, but cited her experience as a potential benefit. There was no clear consensus on Judy Moore.

Discussion

The fifth grade team at Fountain Valley engaged in lively, animated discussions of

curriculum and school-related issues, often late into the afternoon. The discussions were dominated by the team captain, Kathy Henry, who not only moved the agenda but also contributed heavily to discussions about curriculum, instructional activities, and team business. At the same time, she lightened the mood at times with amusing quips and anecdotes. Her sidetracks were spontaneous interruptions of the discussion, not conscious moves to break tension.

The only team member who initiated more sidetracks was Linda Miller, one of the two team members applying for transfer to a middle school. Most of her comments were ironic one-liners about teachers or students at Fountain Valley. Outside of these sidetrack comments, her participation was limited.

Carol Allen, the other team member who had applied for a transfer to middle school, was the second most active participant in discussions, surpassed only by Kathy Henry, the team captain. While she too played a role in sidetracking the discussion at times, her contributions were generally germane to the agenda. At times the discussion devolved into a two-way conversation between Kathy Henry and Carol Allen, with the other team members participating primarily through asking questions of one of the two. During these moments in the meetings, Anne Melton, Marsha Curry, and Julie Smith would often initiate private conversations with each other. Other team members participated in private conversations at times, but these three teachers did it most consistently.

Susan Collins was the most task-oriented member of the team according to the data collected, with 94.5% of her interactions related in some way to an agenda item. Her interactions were also selective; she was very active and in command when leading a discussion herself, but said little during the two-way exchanges between Kathy Henry and Carol Allen.

Lynn Taylor was also highly task-oriented, with 91% of her interactions related to an agenda item. Outside of their relatively high level of private conversations, most of the interactions of Anne Melton, Marsha Curry, and Julie Smith were agenda-related.

The instructional planning discussions usually took the form of suggestions made by veteran teachers about instructional activities that could be used to teach the content under discussion. Kathy Henry and Carol Allen encouraged the novice teachers not to be discouraged if children did not do as well as they might expect. They warned them of pitfalls in content. Less experienced teachers asked questions and expressed appreciation for guidance, and relief that their concerns were mirrored in the experiences of the veterans. Each meeting seemed to have a particular focus or area that took up most of the discussion time, so some planning was brief and cursory. Sometimes not all subjects were covered.

The meetings at which teachers discussed prospective teachers for the team revealed their preference for candidates with whom they had some prior knowledge. Of the three candidates, the one who received the most positive and immediate support was Brenda May, who had not only worked at Fountain Valley as an aide, but had completed her student teaching experience with Susan Collins, a team member. Comments during the meeting did not refer to her interview at all, but focused entirely on team members' experiences with her since that time.

Pam Russell was also employed as an instructional aide but with less direct experience at the school because she completed her student teaching in another district. Team members did focus on her answers to hypothetical teaching situation questions, but were willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. They agreed to interview her again, and seemed to be listening for answers they could use to support hiring her. Judy Moore, the experienced teacher with no direct connection to Fountain Valley, met with the most skepticism from team members. It appears

that she might have been a viable candidate if the team had not had more familiar candidates who appeared to them to be at least as strong and compatible.

Future Study

At this point in its evolution, the fifth grade team at Fountain Valley is made up of strong veteran teachers who have several years of experience with this type of team teaching, and less experienced teachers who seem to be finding their way in this type of arrangement. Future study can reveal how the team sees itself, and how it evolves over time

Beyond the interaction data reported here, the perceptions of teachers regarding the team, their role in it, and the effects this type of planning has on their teaching are all areas of interest. Teachers on the team will be interviewed at selected points throughout the coming school year to ascertain their responses to these issues.

The team captain planned a ten-week maternity leave at the beginning of the following school year. Knowing that this maternity leave would occur, the team selected a new team captain at the end of the school year. At the beginning of the following school year, two teachers transferred to new positions and were replaced by new teachers. In addition, one new teacher unit was added at this time, making a total of nine teachers on the team. The interactions of this team, and comparisons to the previous configuration, will be reported in a future study.

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Table 1

Participation Level

Teacher	M	P
Lynn Taylor	7.7	4.4
Susan Collins	22	12.6
Kathy Henry	48.7	27.8
Carol Allen	40.7	23.2
Linda Miller	13.7	7.8
Marsha Curry	19	10.8
Anne Melton	12.5	7.1
Julie Smith	11	6.3
	175.3	100

M= Mean of Interactions per meeting
P= Percentage of Interactions for each teacher

Note: Marsha Curry, Anne Melton, and Julie Smith did not attend one meeting.

Table 2

Interaction Type Summary

Interaction Categories	AI	AC	RD	BA	ST	MS	PR	N *teacher*	P *teacher*
Teachers									
Lynn Taylor	1	55	4	0	2	3	1	66	7.4
Susan Collins	3	93	4	2	1	0	5	108	12.2
Kathy Henry	26	217	7	5	26	13	8	302	34.0
Carol Allen	5	141	4	1	9	9	11	180	20.3
Linda Miller	1	29	2	1	5	5	1	44	5.0
Marsha Curry	2	61	4	3	4	5	12	91	10.3
Anne Melton	0	59	1	0	3	1	13	77	8.7
Julie Smith	0	9	0	0	0	2	8	19	2.1
N *category*	38	664	26	12	50	38	59	887	
P *category*	4.3	74.9	2.9	1.4	5.6	4.3	6.7		

Table 3

Interaction Types by Teacher

Interaction Categories		AI	AC	RD	BA	ST	MS	PR	Total
Teachers									
Susan Collins	N	3	93	4	2	1	0	5	108
	P	2.8	86.1	3.7	1.9	0.9	0.0	4.6	
Kathy Henry	N	26	217	7	5	26	13	8	302
	P	8.6	71.9	2.3	1.7	8.6	4.3	2.6	
Carol Allen	N	5	141	4	1	9	9	11	180
	P	2.8	78.3	2.2	0.6	5.0	5.0	6.1	
Anne Melton	N	0	59	1	0	3	1	13	77
	P	0.0	76.6	1.3	0.0	3.9	1.3	16.9	
Marsha Curry	N	2	61	4	3	4	5	12	91
	P	2.2	67.0	4.4	3.3	4.4	5.5	13.2	
Lynn Taylor	N	1	55	4	0	2	3	1	66
	P	1.5	83.3	6.1	0.0	3.0	4.5	1.5	
Linda Miller	N	1	29	2	1	5	5	1	44
	P	2.3	65.9	4.5	2.3	11.4	11.4	2.3	
Julie Smith	N	0	9	0	0	0	2	8	19
	%	0.0	47.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.5	42.1	

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